

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

Culture of secrecy continues

Last Thursday, three new members — including me — joined the Pottstown School Board at its reorganization meeting. As a result, seven of the nine board members have formally pledged to:

- Preserve Pottstown's neighborhood elementary schools.
- Practice fiscal responsibility.
- Promote open government.

This last pledge should be the easiest to fulfill, because it doesn't cost any money, and it shouldn't require making tough decisions.

The Pottstown School District belongs to the people of Pottstown. The school board is not a private club, but an assembly of nine people who are stewards of the public trust and an enormous sum of public money — \$53 million in the current school year.

Most of what the Pottstown School District does should be public information. As Harrisburg right-to-know attorney Craig Staudenmaier has written:

These are your records. If you were told that you could not see a copy of your own check ledger or employment contract, you would be rightfully upset.

The government's records are no different, because they are maintained for you at your expense. More important, they provide you the ability to be informed and to monitor the actions and spending of your government — a fundamental principle of our democracy and this commonwealth.

Unfortunately, a culture of secrecy has evolved in the Pottstown School District that withholds information from all but a few "insiders" and prevents school directors from doing their jobs responsibly.

For all practical purposes, our school board is almost completely reliant on two people to oversee the district: the solicitor (lawyer), to tell us what we can and cannot

legally do; and the superintendent, to tell us about school district operations.

The current board did not choose the superintendent, David Krem. Two months ago, the lame duck school board gave 5-year contracts to our four top administrators, called the executive team, at a total cost of \$3.2 million, not including benefits.

Even though I am a board member, I do not know what our administrators' qualifications are. Last year, our solicitor, Stephen Kalis, informed me in writing:

"Please note that there are no current resumes maintained by the School District for any executive team member."



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

One month ago, after I was elected, I asked Mr. Krem for resumes of the district's administrators. I also asked for other information that is vital to my ability to make informed decisions:

- The Pottstown School District Employee Directory (published annually).
- Enrollment by grade level.
- Enrollment by school.
- Special education enrollment.
- Percent of low-income students.
- Percentage of minority students.
- Number of students by individual classroom at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.
- Middle school and high school teacher schedules.

I copied solicitor Kalis with this request for information. As of today, I have been given nothing.

The district's culture of secrecy makes a mockery of democracy. It must end.

This column expresses the personal views of Tom Hylton and does not represent the views of any public or private organization with which he is affiliated.

Summary

- **The Pottstown School District promotes a culture of secrecy. The school board cannot carry out its responsibilities if current practices are allowed to continue.**